

## It was all a mystery until the cross

### Was God's great plan of salvation actually failing? It certainly looked like it until...

I read somewhere that it's mentioned three times in scripture that the "angels rejoice." They rejoiced at Creation, at the birth of Christ, and they rejoice whenever a sinner repents. All three occasions also happen to be landmark events in the life of us humans, which indicates the angels were in on God's plan of salvation from the beginning, so when each of these events happened (or still happen in the case of sinners repenting), it's a time of great celebration.

But doesn't scripture also tell us that in the Old Testament era the plan of salvation was, in fact, a huge mystery? Paul talks of it as "[God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began](#)," **1 Corinthians 2:7**.

Does that mean, then, that the angels *didn't* understand God's plan? It doesn't look like it because "[insight into the mystery of Christ](#)" was given to Paul (**Ephesians 3:2-4**); it "[was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets \(verse 5\)](#)," because it was God's intent "[that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms](#)." In other words, it wasn't given to people or to angels to understand God's plan **until the church existed**.

The angels may have "rejoiced," therefore, at both the Creation and the birth of Christ, but did any of them actually grasp what they were rejoicing about until the church came along? For all their great wisdom, which the Bible says is far superior to ours, we discover from Paul that God's wisdom was actually still a mystery to them.

But how could that be when the angels had watched God in action for centuries and they themselves had played a major part in that action, too? They'd spoken for God, administered his law, protected his people, dealt personally with Gideon and Abraham on God's behalf and even destroyed cities like Sodom and Gomorrah. So if anyone knew what God was up to, they did.

On the other hand, it was a bit odd because things weren't exactly working out very well, were they? For all God's brilliance and wisdom, the one nation he'd chosen to show off his incredible love and power, ended up rejecting him. So all through the Old Testament there'd been no proof yet that God's plan actually

worked, and for a while there it even looked like it had completely failed because Israel, even after all that God had done for them, wanted nothing to do with him.

So much for God's great plan of salvation for humanity, because who was being saved?! Nothing God did worked on the Israelites - not blessings, not miracles, not spectacular deliverance from enemies, not staggering mercy, nor fear of horrible penalties or terrible punishment, either. For centuries God had loved Israel with all his heart but Israel had never loved him back. Logically speaking, it should have worked, but it didn't. Instead, it had all ended up in miserable failure. It truly was a "mystery!"

Ah, but then came the birth of Christ and that made the angels rejoice, because this was it, now the plan would surely work.

On the other hand, why on earth would God the Father send Jesus to the Earth as a human baby? Jesus was the great Eternal God, and for thousands of years the angels had witnessed his incredible power and wisdom, watched him as he brought the Earth into existence and gave life to Adam and Eve, so who would've thought that in God's great plan of saving human beings their Creator would become like one of them?

No religion up to this point had reduced their God (or gods) to the same level as their creation. In every religion, God (or the equivalent of) was always supreme, powerful and threatening, and you'd better bow down and worship him, or else. But in reality how could God (or the gods) be anything but powerful and supreme? It was the only way to make rebellious humans behave, right? And wasn't that the way God had operated with his own people, the Israelites, too?

But then all of a sudden - after thousands of years of God being supreme and tough - the angels watched this very same God make himself lower than them! He gave up everything he was as God to become a helpless, human baby. But the angels must've believed Jesus knew what he was doing because they announced his birth with joy, even if at that point they had no idea how God was going to bring the entire world into a state of peace and unity by being born as a human being.

Perhaps what the angels were thinking of at that moment was the amazing prophecy in **Isaiah 42:1, 4, 6-7** - "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations...he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth...I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles, to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness."

Was this what God was up to, then - that, through the human Jesus, God was going to fulfill this prophecy, bringing justice and healing to all nations? In that case, "salvation had come at last!" - it was time, therefore, to rejoice.

But even as the angels rejoiced, there was another nagging thought that had bugged them for centuries, that still hadn't been resolved in their minds. It was all those other prophecies about Christ having to die. Peter spoke of this in **1 Peter 1:10-11** - "[Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ,](#)" and then at the end of **verse 12**, "[Even angels long to look into these things.](#)"

What was all this stuff about Christ having to suffer? When? Why? What "circumstances" could ever merit his death? And how on earth would Jesus' suffering play a part in healing the blind, freeing captives and releasing people from the dungeons of darkness? It was another excruciating mystery! Mystery on top of mystery was piling up here. What was it all about?

At the time of Jesus' birth, though, it looks like the angels had come to terms with Jesus being human. In one way it made a lot of sense too, because with Jesus growing up as a human among humans, he could straighten them out in person. He could also make a tremendous impression on people as he preached up a storm, performed startling miracles and healings, and did all kinds of good deeds to win people's hearts to him.

And to begin with it looked like it was working. People flocked to Jesus in their thousands. They followed him wherever he went. They called him the Messiah, shouted their "hosannas" as he entered Jerusalem, and wise old prophets predicted salvation had come at last to Israel.

Several times during his ministry, however, Jesus talked about having to die, and people didn't like him talking like that. They stopped following him. And when he did finally die, it was a terrible shock. Out of all the thousands who'd followed him only one hundred and twenty disciples remained.

Well, this hadn't worked either, then, had it? First, the tough love stuff in the Old Testament hadn't worked, and now Jesus had been a complete flop, too. Instead of thousands being saved as Isaiah 42 had indicated, the angels watched Jesus' ministry collapse in less than four years and come to a quick and dismal end as the creatures he'd come to save killed him.

So much for the "wisdom" of God in sending Jesus to the Earth as a human. It had failed miserably, and it didn't bode well for God's great plan of salvation for the whole world, either, because if God being supreme (as he had been in the

Old Testament) hadn't worked, and God being humble (as he had been in Christ) hadn't worked either, what was left?

But then something remarkable happened: Sinners began to repent. Why? Because of this message by Peter in **Acts 2** - "Men of Israel," he boomed in **verses 22-23**, "listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited to you by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross...But (**verse 32**) God has raised this Jesus to life," and he is now "Exalted to the right hand of God... Therefore (**verse 36**) let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."

And that was all it took, **verse 37**. "When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?'" One moment they were just typical Jews, totally unaffected by Jesus Christ or even interested in him, and then suddenly they were responding in large numbers to a message about Christ dying on the cross being God's plan all along - and so was their part in crucifying him, too.

The power in that simple message was astonishing. But now, at last, the angels knew where the power of salvation lay. It wasn't in the Old Testament system of forcing good behaviour by a strict system of law backed up with power and punishment - and it wasn't in the hundreds of healings and other miracles Jesus did, either. The power to save a sinner lay purely in the power of the cross.

It was a major mystery solved, but it only gave rise to another mystery, because why did God wait so long to reveal the secret to salvation? Why didn't he reveal it in the Garden of Eden, instead of letting humans flail around pathetically in their ignorance for thousands of years?

There's a clue in **1 Corinthians 1:19**, "For it is written: 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.'" And for what purpose, pray tell? **Verse 29**, "so that no one may boast before him." It was to put human beings in their place, by giving us all the time in the world to come up with our own wisdom and depend on our own intelligence first.

And what was the result? Well, it was a rather embarrassing result because after 4,000 years no one (except people like Abraham, David and the prophets, whom God dealt with directly) had discovered who God was, what he was up to or how he was going about it. Bluntly put, **verse 21**, "the world through its wisdom did not know him." Even Israel, who had God so close to them, got him completely wrong. So much for human intelligence!

When enough time had gone by, God then steps in personally with a message about Jesus dying on the cross and in a matter of moments people suddenly understand how ignorant they've been about God and they turn to him in devotion and praise (Acts 2:42, 47).

It was startling, especially the speed of it. It was also a shattering blow to human pride because this sudden devotion to God hadn't come from a brilliant piece of oratory by an accomplished speaker, it had come from a simple message about the cross by an uneducated chap called Peter. It was only because of God that they now understood **verse 30**, that it's "Christ Jesus who has become for us wisdom from God - that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption."

None of them had clued in by themselves that the "the power of God and the wisdom of God" was Jesus Christ (**verse 24**). Imagine how they must have felt, then, when they realized they'd just killed him. So much for human wisdom! No wonder they were "cut to the heart."

But at least it resolved the mystery as to why God had waited so long to unveil his wisdom - it was to allow plenty of time to prove how lacking human wisdom is, so that we humans have nothing to boast about, **verse 20**. "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" Paul asks. Yes, God had, because no one had discovered his secret to human salvation, and it was only through the message of the cross that they understood it. Even then, to most people, "the message of the cross is foolishness," **verse 17**.

To an educated chap like Paul it must have been shattering to realize all his religious upbringing and strict keeping of God's laws and rituals hadn't been the secret to his salvation after all. But it accomplished God's purpose, in tearing Paul away from depending on his own wisdom. Out the window went all his pride and instead, **chapter 2:2-5**, "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power." And where was God's power and wisdom? In the message of the cross.

Islam becomes a wonderful comparison here, because it doesn't preach the cross so its faith still rests on man's wisdom, not God's. Result? It has no idea that God has totally sewn up our eternity in Jesus Christ. It still thinks our eternity is up to us. So instead of destroying human pride, it simply preserves it, by giving people the idea they can save themselves by their own efforts. It's tragic. Islam has people stuck back in the dark days of the Old Testament, thinking a system of rules, regulations and rituals, rigorously enforced by fear of punishment, will get people to paradise, despite the obvious fact it didn't work for Israel for nearly 2,000 years!

The Christian idea of salvation through Christ dying on a cross is foolishness to Islam. But it's when "Jesus Christ is clearly portrayed as crucified," **Galatians 3:1**, that it dawns on people there's no need to "attain your goal by human effort" anymore, **verse 3**. What a relief that would be to Muslims, if only they could believe it, that their salvation has already been accomplished for them through the cross, so there's no need for all their rules, regulations and rituals based on human wisdom anymore. They can dump the lot! And through the centuries that's exactly what millions of people have done. They've repented of their dependence on man-made religions and trusted God's wisdom instead.

And the angels have been watching all this happening through the centuries, too. They've noticed that when the cross is preached it has amazing power. Sinners repent. And it doesn't matter who the sinner is or how bad his sins are, the cross can change anyone. There's no personality out there that can't be changed through the cross. It's remarkable.

No wonder the angels rejoice when a sinner repents because it's proof all over again of God's amazing wisdom, especially when it's shown through people like us in the church, who are the weak of the world. But that was exactly according to God's plan too, **1 Corinthians 1:27-28**, because "God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise (and) the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things - and the things that are not - to nullify the things that are so that no one may boast before him."

And look at us; we're a motley crew of misfits that no one in his right mind would look to and depend on for wisdom and intelligence, but that's for the angels' sake primarily, because it's "through the church (that) the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms," **Ephesians 3:10**.

The angels, therefore, watch in fascination (and rejoicing) as God's wisdom in the message of the cross does its magic in the lives of the weak and feeble. The angels watch pathetic cases like us suddenly see the truth of God in the cross and we dump religion all together, trusting totally in God's wisdom instead. And they watch the same thing happen to religious fanatics and atheists, to mystics and cynics, to Jews and Gentiles, men and women, young and old - the cross reaches them all. People who had no interest in God and no idea of his plan of salvation, are suddenly devoted to him, based on nothing but Christ crucified.

And now it's not a mystery to the angels anymore, either. God's wisdom is clear for all to see, that God made sure salvation is entirely his doing, so that success is guaranteed. And when people finally grasp that, they can rejoice too, just like the angels do!

(This is a follow-up sermon to the series "Why Christ ascended")